THE QUIET CRISIS OF THE 1960S

Stewart L. Udall and the Birth of Environmentalism

Stewart L. Udall was Secretary of Interior under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. His tenure (1961-1969) was marked by an unprecedented degree of concern for the quality of the environment and he is regarded as a leader of the movement that blossomed into environmentalism. His 1963 book* The Quite Crisis, *from which this article is excerpted, called for a revitalized conservation movement with a broad agenda to address the social and environmental costs of post World War II industrial expansion, urbanization, and population growth. The book reflected the merging of the conservation ethic with a broader-based environmental agenda and emphasized the need for natural resource restoration partnerships among government, business, and private groups to deal with region-wide and ecosystem-scale projects.

Stewart L. Udall

Above, Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall and President John F. Kennedy at the White House in 1961. On November 27, 1967, General and Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower, above right, having donated their farm and house at Gettysburg, PA to the United States, participated in a simple ceremony marking the transfer of the property with Secretary Stewart Udall. Under authority of the Historic Sites Act of 1935, it was designated the Eisenhower National Historic Site. The site adjoins the Gettysburg National Military Park. NPS photo courtesy of the Harpers Ferry Historic Photograph Collection

If the forester and reclamation engineer symbolized the conservation effort during **Theodore Roosevelt's** time, and the Tennessee Valley Authority planner and the Civilian Conservation Corps tree planter typified the land program of **Franklin D. Roosevelt's** New Deal, the swift ascendancy of technology made the scientists the surest conservation symbol of the '60s. His instruments are the atom-smasher, the computer, and the rocket—tools that have opened the door to an ultimate storehouse of energy and may yet reveal the secrets of the stars.

The surge of science was a boon to many areas of resource conservation. During the war years and those that followed, the alchemies of research brought new metals into use, created synthetics and substitute products, and increased the usefulness of many raw materials. Investments in basic research in agriculture paid off with discoveries that gave wider insights into agronomy while plant genetics and plant pathology yielded new strains, which, with new fertilizers and pesticides, made the granaries of American farmers overflow and gave us an opportunity to share our surplus and our science with other nations. Similarly, research in animal husbandry increased our ability to raise livestock and science encouraged the owners of public and private forest lands to apply the tree-farming techniques fostered by the successors of **Gifford Pinchot**.

We must have a ground swell of concern over the quiet crisis, which could culminate in a third wave of the conservation movement.

These triumphs of technology have, in the 1960s, lent a note of optimism to the reports of most resource experts. Today, we are told technology carries in its hands the keys to a kingdom of abundance and sound solutions to many conservation problems rest largely on adequate research and efficient management. At last, long-range resource planning is becoming an indispensable aide to science in assuring an abundance of resources for human use.

Ironically, however, these very successes of science have presented a new set of problems that constitute the quiet crisis of conservation in this decade. It began with the in-rush to the cities at the outset of World War II and has intensified with each new advance of technology. Our accomplishments in minerals and energy, in electronics and aircraft, in autos and agriculture have lifted us to new heights of affluence, but in the process we have lost ground in the attempt to provide a habitat that will, each day, renew the meaning of the human enterprise. A lopsided performance has allowed us to exercise dominion over the atom and to invade outer space, but we have sadly neglected the inner space that is our home. We can produce a wide range of goods and machines, but our manipulations have multiplied waste products that befoul the land and have introduced frightening new forms of erosion that diminish the quality of indispensable resources and even imperil human heath.

The hazards appear on every hand: many new machines and processes corrupt the very air and water; in what **Rachel Carson** has called "an age of poisons," an indiscriminate use of pesticides threatens both man and wildlife; and the omnipresent symbol of the age, the auto, in satisfying our incessant demand for greater mobility, has added to the congestion and unpleasantness of both cities and countrysides.

The conservation effort was confused and side tracked by the cataclysmic events that began in 1939. In the two decades that followed, public men were so preoccupied by the urgent issues of the hot and cold wars that none tried, as [Gifford] Pinchot and the two Roosevelts had done, to expand the conservation concept and apply it to the new world of natural resources and the new problems of land stewardship. As a result of this failure to keep the conservation idea abreast of the times, such successful conservers as the scientific industrialists and scientific farmers seldom consider themselves conservationists at all, while many modern disciples of Thoreau and Muir have narrowed their concern to park, forest, wildlife, or wilderness problems.

With the passing of each year, neglect has piled new problems on the nation's doorstep. Some brilliant successes—in electronics, atom physics, aerodynamics, and chemistry, for example—encouraged a false sense of well-being, for our massive ability to overpower the natural world has also multiplied immeasurably our capacity to diminish the quality of the total environment. Our water husbandry methods have typified these failures. At the same time that our requirements for fresh water were doubling, our national sloth more than doubled our water pollution. We now are faced with the need to build 10,000 treatment plants and to spend $6 billion to conserve water supplies.

Much of our river development proceeded on an uncoordinated basis, although regional planning, which Major Powell would have applauded, had an inning when the Upper Colorado River Storage Project was passed in 1956. The incursions of industry, agriculture, and urbanization into the marshlands were reducing waterfowl populations. Acreage in new parklands created by federal and state governments was too sparse to be significant: in 1940, 130 million Americans had a spacious National Park System of 22 million acres; 20 years later, a population which had grown to a more mobile 183 million inherited an overcrowded system that had been enlarged by only a few acres.

Of 21,000 miles of ocean shore line in the contiguous 48 states, only seven percent was reserved for public recreation. In addition, the most eroded lands in the United States—the overused grasslands of the Western public domain—were not restored to full fertility despite the new American awareness of the importance of soil conservation. Asphalt inroads of city subdividers in search of quick profits were so ill-conceived that stream valleys and open space were obliterated.

In the postwar period, unfortunately, most Americans took their out-of-doors for granted. It was a fact that pressures were growing each year to despoil our few remaining wilderness areas; Americans who were accustomed to out-door recreation as a way of life—with access to public areas for hunting, fishing, hiking, and swimming—found overcrowding increasing each year. Most state and city governments faced so many growth problems that they had little time for foresight in planning their overall environment.

It was a sad fact also that the men, women, and children of America the Beautiful became the litter champions of the world. Each year about five million battered autos are added to our junk yards. Aided by industries that produce an incredible array of boxes, bottles, cans, gadgets, gewgaws, and a thousand varieties of paper products, our landscape litter has reached such proportions that in another generation a trash pile or piece of junk will be within a stone's throw of any person standing anywhere on the American land mass. Our irreverent attitudes toward the land and our contempt for the Indians' stewardship concepts are nowhere more clearly revealed than in our penchant to pollute and litter and contaminate and blight once-attractive landscapes.

The promised land of thousands of new products, machines, and services has misled us. And the conservation movement, which should have become an intricate and interlocking effort on a hundred fronts, was itself disorganized and outdated. Simultaneously, the steep upsurge of population and the pell-mell rush to enlarge our cities changed our people-to-people ratio and our attitudes toward the land with it. Indifference to the land was also accelerated by new seductions of spectatorship, the requirements of industrial growth, and air-conditioned advantages that made glassed-in living so appealing. The predictable result was that sedentary, city-bound citizens were encouraged to acquiesce in the diminution of the spaciousness and freshness and green splendor of the American earth.

Intoxicated with the power to manipulate nature, some misguided men have produced a rationale to replace the Myth of Superabundance. It might be called the Myth of Scientific Supremacy, for it rests on the rationalization that the scientists can fix everything tomorrow. The modern land raiders, like the public land raiders of another era, are ready to justify short-term gains by seeking to minimize the long-term losses. As **George Perkins Marsh** pointed out more than a century ago, greed and shortsightedness are conservation's mortal enemies. In the years ahead, the front line of conservation will extend from minerals to mallards, from salmon to soils, from wilderness to water, but most of our major problems will not be resolved unless the resource interrelationships are evaluated with an eye on long-term gains and long-term values.

Large-scale conservation work can no longer be accomplished by the flourish of a President's pen or through funds appropriated to fight a business depression. If we are to preserve both the beauty and the bounty of the American earth, it will take thoughtful planning and a day-in and day-out effort by business, by government, and by the voluntary organizations. If the area of individual involvement is enlarged, if enough modern Muirs step forward to fight for "legislative interference" to save and check its despoilment, the conservation movement can become a sustained, systematic effort both to produce and to preserve.

Full-fledged collaboration of science and industry and government, quickened by the spur of business competition, will enable us to write bright new chapters in the conservation of some resources. The continuing revolution in research should give us the means to harness the tides of Passamaquoddy, interconnect the electric-power systems of whole regions, economically extract fresh water from the seas, turn vast oil shale beds into oil, and, by discovering the innermost secrets of fission and fusion, allow is to "breed" energy from rocks.

Government leadership and government investment, however, must continue to play the larger roll in traditional conservation work. In a matter of decades many regions will confront an insistent water crisis. Water conservation must always be primarily a public endeavor. It is already plain that regional planning, basin-wide water regimens, transmountain diversions of water from areas of surplus to more arid watersheds, sustained yield management of underground aquifers, and the development of techniques for pollution control and the re-use and recycling of water will be needed to save the day for watershort areas of the United States. To achieve this we must begin now to train a fully adequate corps of hydroscientists and to develop an awareness of the vital elements of a water-conservation program.

Secretary Udall and Director Wirth of the National Park Service stop to view exhibits at the Rock Creek Nature Center.

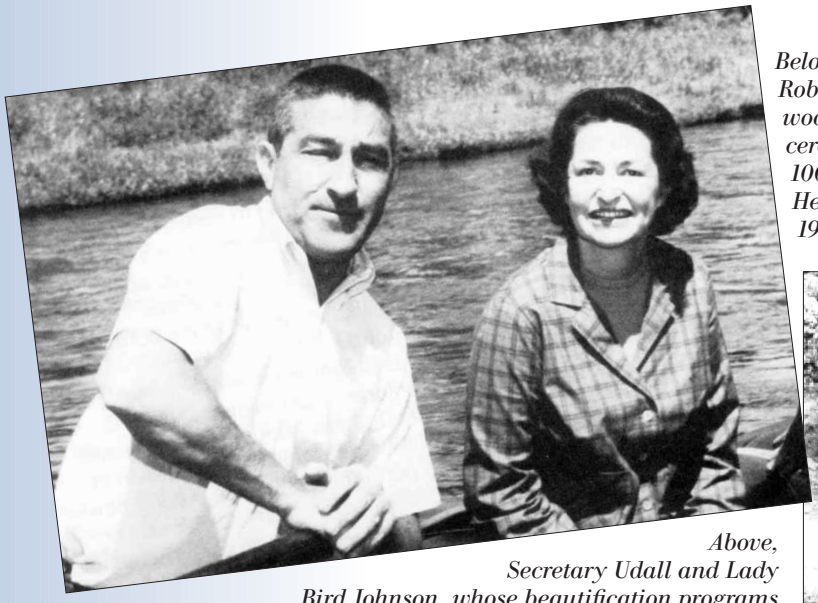
The quiet conservation crisis is the end product of many forces. Its threat is all the more serious because most harm involves subtle erosion and contamination, and because motives of commercial profit do not enlist public support. Quick action can be expected only when threats to the public health or public convenience are immanent. The larger task will not be undertaken unless a quickening conscience brings us to act now to protect the land for future generations.

Secretary's Nature Walk, May 1962. NPS photos courtesy of the Harpers Ferry Historic Photograph Collection

As inheritors of a spacious virgin continent, we have had strong roots in the soil and a tradition that should give us special understanding of the mystique of people and land. It is our relationship with the American earth that is being altered by the quiet crisis, our birthright of fresh landscapes and far horizons. Unless we are to betray our heritage consciously, we must make an all-out effort now to acquire the public lands which present and future generations need. Only prompt action will save prime park, forest, shoreline, and other recreation lands before they are pre-empted for other uses or priced beyond the public purse.

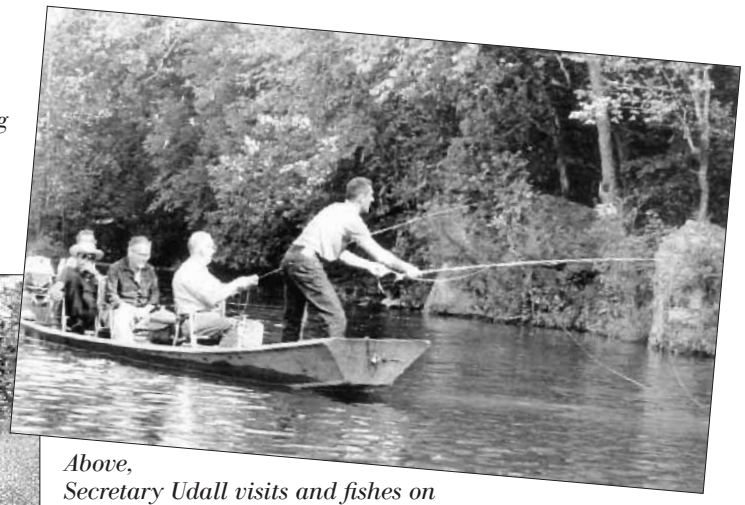
The Land and Water Conservation Fund proposed by President Kennedy may mark a turning point in conservation history. If the states are to provide leadership before it is too late, if the few remaining spacious seashores are to be preserved for all of the people, if wildlife values are to be permanently protected and our national park, forest, and wildlife refuge systems are to be rounded out by the addition of the remaining suitable lands, the task must begin immediately and be completed within the next three decades.

The status we give our wilderness and near-wilderness areas will also measure the degree of our reverence for the land. American pioneering in establishing national parks and promoting the wilderness concept is already being emulated in many parts of the world today. Many nations no longer have the option of preserving part of their land in its pristine condition. We must take ours up before it is too late. A wilderness



Above,
Secretary Udall and Lady Bird Johnson, whose beautification programs helped change the face of our public spaces.

Below, Secretary Udall and poet Robert Frost strolling through the woods at Dumbarton Oaks following ceremonies commemorating the 100th anniversary of the death of Henry David Thoreau. May 11, 1962.



Above,
Secretary Udall visits and fishes on a float trip down the Current River in the Missouri Ozarks to develop interest in a proposed plan to make the area the Ozarks River National Monument.

system will offer what many consider the supreme human experience. It will also provide watershed protection, a near-perfect wildlife habitat, and an unmatched science laboratory where we can measure the world in its natural balance against the world in its man-made imbalance.

The quiet crisis demands a rethinking of land attitudes, deeper involvement by leaders of business and government, and methods of making conservation decisions which put a premium on foresight. With the acumen of our scientist, we can achieve optimum development of resources that will let us pluck the fruits of science without harming the tree of life. Once we decide that our surroundings need not always he subordinated to payrolls and profits based on short-term considerations, there is hope that we can both reap the bounty of the land and preserve an inspiriting environment.

The Muirs and Olmsteds and Pinchots of the decades ahead will surely fail unless both our business and public budgets embrace conservation values. Enlightened leaders of the business community are already pointing the way: such companies as Lever Brothers, Johnson's Wax, and the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company have demonstrated that a beautifully designed building is the most attractive form of advertising.

Conservation will make headway when it is patently good business for companies to invest in programs of education and practices of production which emphasize both conservation and industrial efficiency. Conservation statesmen must prove that profits and the conservation cause are compatible, if we are to succeed in making an attractive and orderly environment part of our national purpose. At present, many of our policies actively conspire against conservation and the conservation-minded businessman who often finds himself at an intolerable competitive disadvantage if he implements his convictions.

Where our laws make land reclamation and pollution abatement a normal part of the cost of doing business, enlightened businessmen are already working with the conservation cause. Once intolerable competitive advantages are eliminated, researchers will quickly devise machines and gadgets to minimize the damage. But environment restoration and preservation can succeed only if we pay as we go.

Our mastery over our environment is now so great that the conservation of a region, a metropolitan area, or a valley is more important, in most cases, than the conservation of any single resource. Complex decisions will require sophisticated judgments that weigh all elements and explore all possible alternatives. Slim valleys and regional slums will be the result, unless we put our resources to their highest and best use. As the area of conflict and overlap increases we must constantly improve our decision-making techniques. Nor must we be afraid to decide the toughest of issues: practices that defer necessary decisions can also be a threat to the national welfare. Geography has always been a global science and conservation must now become a truly global concept, if the optimum use of resources is to be achieved. Nature's rules still obtain, and all parts of the natural world, from minerals and marine life to the gulf streams of the ocean and jet streams of the upper atmosphere, obey a single set of laws.

It is the seven seas themselves, the one remaining largely unspoiled, untapped resource which now represent the largest remaining frontier of conservation on this earth. The atmosphere and the oceans are the two resources that are owned by all of the people of the world. Yet, save for a few farsighted treaties, we have no plan of management for these common resources, and oceanographers are still at the outer edge of the secrets of the sea.

Lee White, Special Counsel to the President, accepts for President Johnson in payment of a $7 fee, one of the first Recreation/Conservation stickers from Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. NPS photos courtesy of the Harpers Ferry Historic Photograph Collection

With the exception of a few notable agreements, the law of hunt-and-kill is still the code of the sea. Only timely international conservation agreements will avert the spectacle of a resource raid to dwarf those of the past on fur seal and the sea otter. The oceans can be the most fruitful field for international co-operation in conservation, if the nations turn in time to the principles of sustained yield management.

The one factor certain to complicate all of our conservation problems is the ineluctable pressure of expanding population. Our resource planners operate in a bureaucratic trance, assuming that the population of the United States will inevitably double by the year 2000. An all too common corollary assumption is that life in general—and the good, the true, and the beautiful in particular—will somehow be enhanced at the same time. We have growth room in this country, but the time has come for thoughtful men and women to ask some basic questions about our land-people equation.

Our whole history demonstrates that this physical environment has an enormous influence upon man. Are not such inquiries as these, then, pertinent to the future course of human enterprise: What is the ideal "ecology of man," the ideal relationship of the human population to environment? Is man subject to the laws of nature, which hold that every species in any environment has an optimum population? How much living space do human beings need in order to function with maximum efficiency and to enjoy maximum happiness?

More on Stewart L. Udall, page 38.